



Tribune photo by Wes Pope

Claude Rallins walks past empty chemical containers being stored at Acme Barrel Co.'s lot at 2000 W. Hastings St.

"These are places where it's a toxic soup and the kids are playing in the middle of it," Rallins says.

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Concern over barrels is growing

Neighbors call storage site a toxic threat

By John Chase
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

For years, some say, the Near West Side lot filled with rows of multicolored industrial drums piled as high as a house has been more than what it was

designed for: a temporary holding pen for empty hazardous-chemical containers before they are shipped off to be cleansed for reuse.

The lot, some neighbors say, has also attracted the attention of local children, who occasionally have found their way in through holes in the chain-link fence and used the area as a makeshift playground, climbing on the barrels.

"Kids are in there, jumping on the barrels, knocking them down," said Emma

Bradley, 76, who lives behind the lot at 2000 W. Hastings St. "They go in there during the summer. I usually have to chase them out."

Although many in the neighborhood haven't given the lot much thought beyond that, the situation has caught the attention of environmental activists, who most recently protested Sunday at the site, calling it a toxic waste dump and noting it is less than a block from a local public school — Glad-

stone Elementary.

Now, the city seems to be getting involved. On Wednesday, a spokeswoman for Chicago's Department of Environment said the city is considering taking legal action against the lot's owner, Acme Barrel Co., over, among other items, concerns inspectors have regarding the barrels and possible air pollution.

Following complaints this fall, according to Department of Environment

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Barrels

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spokeswoman Jessica Rio, city inspectors have visited the lot and Acme's headquarters at 2300 W. 13th St. and found several problems dealing with air pollution and chemical runoff.

Specifically, she said, inspectors were concerned about potentially dangerous emissions coming from the standing barrels. Though the barrels are technically empty, she said, the residue inside can get into the air.

"We have ongoing concerns about that site," Rio said. "They need to be addressed, and they need to be addressed soon."

Acme's attorney, Gabe Rodriguez, contended Wednesday there has never been any complaint logged against the company in regards to the lot.

"There is not a health hazard to the community," he said.

He refused to comment further.

In October, Rio said, inspectors met with Acme officials and hammered out a 14-point plan on how the company could deal with the city's concerns. But after several follow-up inspections, the most recent on Jan. 12, inspectors weren't satisfied with Acme's progress to mediate the situation, she said.

Rio said Wednesday that inspectors are done visiting the sites and the city is now focusing on whether to take Acme to court.

"We've done a lot of inspections and haven't gotten satisfaction on that," she said. "We're now beyond inspections."

The move comes as local environmental groups have protested about the lot, saying neighbor-



Tribune photo by Wes Pope

Lionel Trepanier, a member of an environmental action group, closes the gate after placing a sign at Acme Barrel Co.'s lot at 2000 W. Hastings St., where the firm stores empty chemical containers.

hood children playing there don't know they are potentially in danger.

Because of the lot's location near Gladstone School, local activist Claude Rallins on Sunday asked that legislation be passed to make areas around schools "dump-free zones."

"These are places where it's a toxic soup and the kids are playing in the middle of it," he said. "And that's just wrong."

Though some neighbors said Wednesday they see children playing in the lot, Gladstone Principal Gary Moriello said he hasn't

noticed a problem with the site in his 12 years at the school.

"I've never had a complaint from parents, students, teachers or anybody," he said. "I've also never smelled anything, and we're not an air-conditioned building, so we have our windows open a lot."

But Melanie Washington, who lives less than a block away in the 2000 block of West 13th Street, said she often sees children in the lot, running between the barrels, climbing on them and rolling them.

Most times, she said, children

get into the lot by climbing through one of the holes in the fence or through the front gate, which is often left open.

On Wednesday, the holes in the fencing had been patched and the front gate was padlocked.

Still, Gabrielle Thurman, 13, who said she attends Gladstone, said children often play in the lot after school on Fridays and during the summer.

But, she said, she's not one of them.

"No way," she said. "Because if I went in there, I could get hurt."

City, state may sue barrel company over fumes

By JON SCHMID
STAFF REPORTER

Chicago and state environmental officials are considering legal action against a South Side barrel reconditioning company, which owns a storage yard that was the target of protesters Sunday.

Complaints about fumes prompted the Chicago Department of Environment and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to inspect Acme Barrel Co.'s storage yard at 13th and Damen, less than a block from an elementary school, as well as its plant at 13th and Ogden.

City officials began meeting with Acme last October about measures the company should take to control fumes from the storage yard and the plant, said environmental department spokeswoman Jessica Rio.

After a Jan. 12 inspection, the department was unsatisfied with Acme's response and referred the case to its legal department, Rio said.

Meanwhile, the Illinois EPA recently sent Acme two notices of intent to pursue legal action because of excess emissions from a painting and coating operation at its plant, said Dennis McMurray of the IEPA.

Acme considers the issues raised by the

environmental agencies minor and the company is working to solve them, said Sam Fiegura, the company's regulatory and quality manager.

Environmentalists from a local branch of the Green Party USA protested in front of the barrel storage yard Sunday, calling it a toxic dump and demanding that the city take action.

The storage yard is less than a block from Gladstone Elementary School and contains up to tens of thousands of empty 55-gallon steel drums stacked up to 30 feet high and awaiting processing at the nearby plant.

Acme repaired holes in the fence at its

storage yard Wednesday, but the company insists that the drums don't contain toxic material and are stored legally.

The barrels, which come from numerous sources and once contained chemicals, are cleaned and reconditioned at Acme's plant.

"We have a drum acceptance policy, and there is nothing acutely hazardous in them," Fiegura said. "It is important to note that we are not a waste handler. We are a reconditioner. We do not treat waste."

Gladstone Elementary School Principal Gary Moriello said there has "never been a problem" with fumes from the storage yard in the 12 years he has worked at the school.

Asian long-horned beetle infestation parkway trees down

All 324 Ravenswood parkway trees known to be infested by the Asian long-horned beetle had been removed by Friday afternoon, including 20 discovered Wednesday and Thursday during a U.S. Forest Service survey. City forester Joe McCarthy said the city expects to start removing 150 infested backyard trees by the end of February, using private contractors. He cautioned homeowners to be alert for unscrupulous people posing as tree-trimmers. He said the city will give each homeowner at least one week's notice of when each tree will be cut.

U.S. opposes use of lead shot at firing range

A federal agency is objecting to the lead shot that would be fired at a trap-shooting range at Sportsman's Park in Naperville. The U.S. Interior Department says it is worried about the danger posed to water fowl. The federal agency asked the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to consider its concerns before issuing a permit.

Award ceremony S-T 2/7

■ Four activists and a gay radio program will receive the 54th annual awards given by the Chicago Commission on Human Relations on Thursday. Mayor Daley will keynote the ceremony honoring Olivia Hernandez, founder and director of the Juan Diego Community Center; Omar Lopez, of CALOR, which helps disabled Hispanics; Sandra Otaka, who helps Asian Americans and other minorities get into the legal profession; James Compton of the Chicago Urban League, and LesBiGay Radio, a gay-oriented program airing on WSBC-AM and WCFJ-AM.

Green Party contends dump is toxic S-T 2/8

Environmentalists from a local branch of the Green Party USA called on the city Sunday to take action against a toxic dump site at 13th and Damen. The protesters called attention to 30-foot piles of drums storing chemicals at the site and the lack of security, evidenced by unlocked gates and large holes in the fence. The dump site is less than a block from Gladstone Elementary School. "The contents of the barrels are a toxic soup that is going right out into the air," said Lionel Trepanier, a spokesman for the group. Trepanier was collecting signatures for a petition asking the state Environmental Protection Agency to launch an investigation of the site.

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Acme BAR

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Ken Westlake*